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Son of Hope

By
Maurice Rodriguez

Prologue

"In every man's memories there are such things as he will reveal not to everyone, but perhaps only to friends. There are also such as he will reveal not even to friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. Then, finally, there are such as a man is afraid to reveal even to himself, and every decent man will have accumulated quite a few things of this sort. That is, one might even say: the more decent a man is, the more of them he will have."

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*

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Overton's

"Stop chewing on your finger, kid."

She removed it from her mouth and rubbed the moisture on her dress, quenching the flower's thirst. She proceeded to grind her teeth.

"Angel."

She stopped.

He pushed the lever to 'P'. She pulled the handle next to her and the humid air hugged her like kin you might visit once a year. She grabbed her purse off the mat and pulled it over her shoulder.

"Do you really need that big ass bag?"

"Yeah, I do," she replied looking up to him, noticing a smile spread across his face.

He put his hand on her head while they walked toward the counter under the shade. They stood in the back of a muddled line. In front of them stood a mother beside her two sons, each a head taller than her. The boys were pink from the oppressive sun. The fleshier of the two boys turned around grinning when his eyes met Angel's. He tugged on his brother's shirt whispering to him something drowned by the sound of the gulls overhead and workers behind the salt-covered counter calling out numbers. The pink boys giggled to each other as they both turned back their sweat covered faces in unison, this time catching the eyes of the man beside the girl at the root of their muffled laughter. They each looked up to him not expecting him to hold his threatening

glare. The boys felt embarrassment rise within them, the kind they feel when they're called upon to read aloud in class and haven't been paying attention. They stepped aside after their mother placed an order for them.

"So, are you feeling a cup or a cone?," he asked her with his hand still placed on her head.

The cashier smiled at the two and complimented Angel on her dress. Angel smiled as sweetly as the cold treat that ran over her fingers.

The Visitor

I didn't know what to call him.

It's not that I couldn't recall his name. I write it down on every receipt. It's just – I don't know. I didn't want to see him. Well, I thought I did. But in that moment, I didn't feel prepared. I've held photos of him before that moment. They say a photograph is worth a thousand words, or is it speaks a thousand words? I don't know. I suppose if they could speak, I wouldn't have recognized his voice anyway.

When he came inside my home, I recognized him from the photographs. He didn't have the coarse copper hair anymore. However, I noticed it was by choice. He wore sand-colored boots, although they didn't seem to elevate him more than a few inches above my mother. God, I hoped I would reach a greater height.

M_____.

He called me by my name, I responded hesitantly though, like anyone would hearing their name echoed from an unfamiliar voice. He shook my hand, or did he embrace me? I can't remember. Whatever the scenario may have been, his brown skin made mine pale in comparison.

I can't remember what was spoken in that moment. It wasn't fulfilling. It was nothing cinematic. Perhaps, it was nothing worth writing about. I don't know, but it has stuck with me like burdocks on shoelaces. I can only recall thinking he didn't know us, only fragments of who we were. He never would know the dreams that came to us on carpets.

*I still don't know what to call him. I know I will not call him by the name we share, dad,
father, padre o papá.*

Mojo's Trucking

They threw aged refrigerators out the back of a dusty trailer.

The glass shelves shatter within them as they fall upon heaps of other scrap metal. He does this once a week. It's his favorite part about this taxing occupation. He doesn't enjoy installing a washer machine on the third floor of an unfinished grandiose residence while some rich prick hovers over him. There is something cathartic about heaving battered home appliances on the carcasses of others in this graveyard. Of course, this is a dump, not a graveyard. He implores anyone to tell him the difference.

"You know, we were young, I was only 19. I didn't know what it took to raise two kids, especially a daughter like Angel."

Here we go again with this fucking story.

"Yeah, I can't imagine having to do that right now."

Of course, if I had to, I would.

"I always told myself that you two were being raised by the best mother there was. You didn't need me. I trusted her."

I don't need you to tell me how suitable of a mother I have. We slept on carpets.

"Mhm."

"Ariel's mother is a different case. I have to play both roles. She was on drugs in Colombia. I can't trust a mother like that to raise a child."

Both roles, oh, my mom is going to love this one. This has to be satire. He isn't this fucking dense, is he? Perhaps her mother thought you were the most suitable father on the planet and that you didn't need her assistance. I'm sure you understand that.

"Oh yeah, it must be difficult."

"It is what it is. Well, don't be a stranger now. Come over the house and visit your grandmother," he jumped down from the lift gate.

Ah yes, what an enticing invitation.

"Just throw that last dryer off and we'll get going."

Dryers are the easiest scraps of metal to toss. Their hollow cores produce a loud echo as they strike against the fragments of other appliances beneath them. He imagines the same sounds would reverberate if he threw him off the truck.

There is no difference.

A Bug in Amber

November 12, 2017

I'm reading your journals, Pop. Mom keeps them hoarded in a room untouched by any warmth except the sun's. I found them preserved within pyramids of memories. Like a bug in amber – you are in this room.

I am a worthless old man that put his time in, sewed into the Korean War, and came out a Hero. The physical part was good, but the memories in my mind – I can't get rid of. I worked back breaking jobs all my life. I just want to enjoy a little time.

At the age of 10, I wasn't able to think beyond myself. I wasn't aware that the blankets eclipsing the sun from warming your room was a way of crawling into yourself. Your cursing, a tactic adapted from war allowing you to cope and communicate with the barbarity surrounding you. I would open your door without warning. Your face would transform from dismay to elation at the realization that it was only me, your Buddy. You would greet me with the smile I contrast to all others – a mouth scarce of teeth. No other compares to its sincerity.

I'm not but half a man. I'm dead from the waist down.

When I was 6, you would walk me home from school and feed me and Angel when Mommy worked. You once drizzled chocolate syrup in my bowl when we ran out of milk to sweeten the tap water my cereal floated on. We worked with what we had. It was you who made it possible for my mother to provide. You were the man of the house because the man whose name I share

abandoned us. He has now projected himself into others, creating more fatherless offspring that share my patronymic, though I do not know who they are. He is a waste, not a man.

If dying takes pain away I'm all for it.

I would open up your door without warning. There was no transformation. Your speech incoherent. Like a bug in amber – you could not move. Blood hemorrhaged in your skull. I felt the futility of that moment drown me. I had never met Death.

I fell asleep in the ICU beside you until the machine flatlined. I couldn't wake until you told me it was time – until you tugged at my heart.

November 19, 2017

When the guns went off in Arlington, my well of tears dried. The flag folding ceremony ended in my hands, as did your medals I've tattooed onto my skin. I was 15 and paralyzed with pain, yet Uncle Eric accosted my mother about why I lacked sentiment. I would like to say she defended me by telling him I had burdened the duty of crying for the entire family. She simply cursed him out. I can see that nearly toothless laugh now in the slideshow of my mind.

I don't place blame on you for not being able to think beyond yourself in this journal. Mental illness has a way of inhibiting us from doing so. Death didn't take the pain away, it only bled into us.

After I'd leave your bedroom I made a habit of telling you I loved you without exception.

That night, in that frigid room, I wasn't able to tell you I loved you. I was the bug in amber.

Ocarina of Time

"Grandma, where are your teeth?" Maurice said playfully.

Dorothy scrunched her face to resemble a witch. They laughed until all air rushed from their lungs and she went into a fit of coughing. They would sit for hours together in her room until the only light that illuminated their skin glowed from the television. Hours were spent in front of that television playing "The Legend of Zelda" and "Super Mario 64."

She had to complete every side mission, covering the entirety of the map in any game she played. She relied on her grandson to help with puzzles and fighting boss battles when frustration rose. In her frustration she would never curse, always finding alternative phrases like – *Son-of-a-sea-cook*. He always thought it amusing, especially after hearing his grandpa grunt "son-of-a-bitch" struggling with a jar of jam or another rudimentary task. She detested his language, yet leaned on it when they would regularly lash out at each other over the most minute details.

She and Richard had been separated for decades before living beneath the same roof once again. Although love existed between them on a separate plane, intimacy never endured the decay of time. For some time in New Haven, before living with Richard again, she stayed with Donald, a southern black man whom Maurice thought was an affable relative of some sort until he learned what a boyfriend was. Alcoholism consumed Donald. Not being able to support herself, Richard offered her a room of her own.

Dorothy never intended on having children. She raised all her brothers and sisters, and was simply tired. However, she produced three. The exhaustion of forced maturation and poverty

took its toll on her ability to raise her own children and watered the seed of selfishness in her being. Richard raised them on his own.

At the news of her daughter bringing a child into the world, she exerted every effort to make amends of their relationship. She offered the entirety of herself to her grandchildren. Witnessing her daughter's struggle to provide for her babies, she was able to grasp the regret in having not been the mother she was once capable of being.

Richard's death forced her to live alone. Her grandchildren no longer fully depended on adult supervision. Maurice now occupied himself outside the home more often than not. His mother gave him the freedom to make teenage mistakes. He lived engulfed in his own world, branching out from his family. Dorothy seldom reigned him in, and only with the allure of her home cooking. Often alone now, she missed the company of her grandchild to act as her sidekick through quests and boss battles. She expressed her solitariness with her daughter, "I don't know. I don't think Maurice likes me much anymore. He hardly comes around."

These words ring inside him today. They thunder within as the air becomes raw and night seeps into day. They pummel at the sight of a centerpiece stuffed bird surrounded by familiar signature aromas. He can taste the words in his mother's pumpkin bread, as if regret were an essential ingredient. He searches for Dorothy's death in the abstraction of his memories, yet can find nothing but her toothless smile. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism of the mind, or because like a bug in amber – Dorothy remains alive through his senses and the "Breath of the Wild."

Therapy

He doesn't permit himself to sink into her.

He leans forward, not allowing his back to rest. His hands sweat profusely as he rubs the ink above his knee. The warmth of the sun magnifies through the only window in the room.

"We can try this again next week if you'd like."

He gazes over her head, averting his eyes from hers. He recognizes a few of the books behind her.

"What do you think, same time?"

Sure.

He wants to explain to her that it's happening at this moment, but he doesn't. He can't.

He just leaves.

He takes the stairs to ground level. He misses a step and clenches the railing next to him as the tension in his entire body tightens. He feels the adrenaline erupt in his throat. At the last step, he takes a seat, hunched over, rubbing his fingers across the surface of his oily awakened face.

See, this is only a routine scare. This is the result of haggard boots on rain-soaked stairs or wool socks on greased wood floors. Yet, this embodies the feeling.

It feels like missing a step. It feels like the way a child might in their basement rushing up the stairs trying to escape the darkness engulfing them. It feels like being elevated 30,000ft above sea level in a filthy pressurized tube with 100 other strangers. Yes, it feels like flying, only without the help of wings to remind you that you are in control of where you glide.

That's just it – it is out of your control. At times, it won't let you sleep no matter how drowsy you feel and no matter how combustible your eyes burn. It nudges you with the pounding of your resting heart to remind you of its existence within you. It overwhelms you when you are doing nothing. It crowds you when you are alone. You don't understand it.

Let me help you understand.

It feels like this You can't grasp it It constricts you from within Breathing becomes laboured It may bring a
nausea You have to focus You don't know how to distinguish it from the external

But it subsides like any other feeling.

You must not sink.

Exploitation

Dee put his penis in her mouth.

Her back lay on the stained carpet floor of her room, surrounded by pink and lavender walls. She lay still, unsure of what was going on, but didn't resist the boy she understood as family. Although she lay in confusion, intuition told her that there was something wrong with this moment.

He didn't quite understand what he was doing on top of her, looking down at her flat freckled face, staring into her almond eyes and oversized tongue. He saw this once before, though not quite like this, as the screen from the television illuminated his face in the darkness of his living room. He didn't know what to do with the erection in his pajamas. He wasn't entirely sure if he was reenacting that scene correctly, but that didn't stop him. What stopped him was fear – fear of being caught, or perhaps a shameful fear in his heart that what he was doing was wrong.

Her family could be heard in the kitchen beneath that stained carpet floor. They were waiting on his return. That moment lasted a bathroom break. He came back in time for his turn to roll the dice. After their board game ended his dad would pick him up.

She told her mom how Dee put his penis in her mouth.

"Maurice, how could she come up with this on her own?"

Mom, you're scaring me. This can't be real.

"Honey, I know it's hard to understand, but she wouldn't have seen this anywhere else."

Why would he do that to her? He's my best friend.

"Baby, people think because your sister is different they can take advantage of her. He didn't think she would be able to tell anyone about this."

Mom, how could I let this happen to her?

"Oh honey, come here, it's not your fault."

Sacrifice

Hope holds them together.

She felt eyes of abhorrent judgment as the conveyer belt rolled forward non-perishables, heavy starchy foods, fortified cereals, and other goods that would satiate her children's hunger. They didn't possess much nutritional value, but fulfilled her promise to herself.

Her face turned a Red 40 hue as she pulled her EBT card from her purse. She thought, why should I be ashamed? And she had no reason to be. Her children would eat.

"Ma, I'll be there soon to pick them up. I'm just on my way from Shop Rite. Do you or Daddy need anything? ... Alright, see you soon."

She was grateful to have her parents around to help with the kids. They were her village. Although her mother was absent in her growth, Dorothy wouldn't miss the opportunity to repair their relationship through her grandchildren. While violent language between her and Richard often filled the home, they maintained civility enough to provide everything in their power for their daughter and her babies.

Hope holds them together.

They ate a hearty plate of pasta, a meal that would likely be eaten for the next three days. He didn't mind though. His sister wouldn't either. She would eat just about anything put in front of her, and even chewed on her fingers, although with no correlation to her hunger.

After scraping his plate clean, leaving only a tomato tint to it, he drew dinosaurs with magic marker. Overheard in the bedroom was his mother weeping quietly. Angel played on the

carpet floor beside him. His ears perked up like a dog's with heightened sense of awareness. He thought to himself, should I check on her? I don't want her to see me though. He peered over the trim around the door way into the pitch-black room without being noticed.

Perhaps he didn't want his mother to know that even she could be vulnerable. However, he understood that her tears were not of fragility, but of vigor.

The stream of dried tears crusted over her cheeks. She was aware of their poverty, but felt an instant of clarity. This lucidity brought about a harmony through the heart – she knew her babies' bellies were full. She kept her promise, and thought, I will exceed that fulfillment.

"Hold yourself together, Hope," she whispered to herself.

Angel's Song

Music rolls from above as the ceiling rattles beneath her bare feet bouncing off the carpet.

You might think, sitting at the crumb-covered wooden table, that a concert commenced over your head. However, it is only Angel dancing disjointedly to the sound of the song reverberating from the speakers in her sunlit room.

The concert ceases at the sound of her alarm clock, though this is no dream – only one of her several reminders to return to the physical tasks that keep everything in order. The alarm may serve as a tedious reminder to unload the dryer, drag the recycle bin to the front of the yard, shower, or eat lunch. The sound of alarms become ritualistic to Angel, serving as a chorus or hook to her song. "Oh shit," she thinks to herself – "I have to get started on my chores."

She heard the front door open as she unloaded the dishwasher.

"Angel, why the **fuck** are the dogs locked up in the middle of the day while you're supposed to be watching them?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I-I'll let them out now."

"**I know** – if you knew then it would've been done. I have an idea, how about you sit in the cage all day?"

Of course, she knew he didn't mean that. She knew better to let the mutts out, but often stayed in her room – her own universe where she's able to express what her cognition limits in reality. She's able to host music festivals, replay entire dramas that flash through her recollection of films, even let her mind wander through naïve lustful reveries.

He released the excited dogs whose paws pattered on tiles and tails wagged gleefully in their crates. At the unhitching of the lock, they greeted him with unbridled energy and love. They clumsily ran their route through the kitchen and out the front door he left open on his way in.

"Can you put these up? I can't reach," she said with a warm glass cup in hand.

"Sure, Short Stuff," he said with a half smirk spread across his lips and with a tinge of annoyance. He placed them upside down, making sure no water rested at the bottom would remain. Placing his hand on her head, she hugged him. He embraced his sister, who came to his chest.

"You stink," she said laughingly, her smile nearly vanishing her almond eyes.

It was true, his shirt now also covered in dog hair. He took off his stained work shirt and threw it on the now clean wooden table.

She asked him how work was, and initially he wanted to tell her contemptuously, waddayathink? However, her embrace transcended this moment and held up a mirror within his mind. He replayed his projection of aggravation upon his sister, rooted in the monotony of his work. Before the shame could flood him, he built a levee.

"You know what, that's a nice floral dress you got on. How about we show it off at Overton's and get some ice cream?"

Angel's face radiated with joy as she thought there nothing better than a sweet cold treat with her big brother on this summer day.

Epilogue

"But how could you live and have no story to tell?"

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *White Nights*